



A Life of Contradictions and Irony

"The American Rocketeer" and two companion films on the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory's history were produced and directed by Blaine Baggett, JPL's director for communications and education. Baggett joined JPL 12 years ago after a career in public television, where he created such documentaries as "The Astronomers," "Space flight" and "John Glenn: American Hero." The national Emmy Award winner discusses here the process of making the three new films on JPL's earliest rocket experiments, the first U.S. satellite and JPL's initial probes to the moon.

What got you started on this project?

These films grew out of my background making documentaries, particularly of topics that span a certain period of history. Not long after joining JPL, I realized there was no documentary history of the laboratory's unique achievements. JPL has been for a half century the world's premiere center for exploring the solar system and beyond -- and I felt that we just *had* to capture that story. So we started by taping oral histories -- interviewing veteran JPLers about early missions that they worked. Then came archival research and preservation of old film footage. The first opportunity to make a documentary was the 50th anniversary of Explorer 1 in 2008. Taking a page out of "Star Wars," "Explorer 1" was actually the second documentary in the series we planned. With that one under our belt, we moved on to the prequel

– “The American Rocketeer,” the story of the founding of JPL. And then we are just now finishing the third film that’s primarily about JPL lunar missions in the ‘60s. These are three out of what I imagine will be about eight films documenting the entire span of the laboratory’s history.

Of the three films, “The American Rocketeer” is the most complex, really a character study of the early JPL director Frank Malina. As you studied the lab’s history, did he leap out as a story that needed to be told?

Yes. I’m a man on a mission about all this. I feel first and foremost that Malina hasn’t been given his proper due. Not long after the end of World War II, Malina was being pursued as an international fugitive by the U.S. government as a suspected subversive when he’d helped to build the American ballistic program virtually from scratch. At the same time, you had a German becoming the leader of American rocketry who’d been a member of the Nazi party who was responsible for the V-2 ballistic missile that killed thousands of people, mostly civilians, in Allied cities. Even more people died in the German camps building them. And this tremendous irony was just swept under the rug. That seems a tremendous injustice.

Beyond that, I had great empathy for Malina as an individual. His family was incredibly gracious and trusting of the story I wanted to tell. Our team was given the keys to Malina’s home in Paris. And the man’s life is all there. We looked in the cupboards, under the rugs and through the files for anything we could find to help tell his personal story. His letters, some very personal, were there, his scrapbooks, newspaper clippings and several of his original art pieces.

Out of all of our research came this picture of a very complex fellow full of contradictions whose life was filled with even more irony. Malina was a pacifist who built weapons systems. Without a doubt a socialist, if not more, he became a millionaire, and an engineer who becomes an artist. And his personal story is played out against a vast backdrop: the Great Depression, then World War II, and then the Cold War and the Red Scare. To me, it’s always tremendously interesting and instructive to experience the broad strokes of history through an individual living through that era. Beyond all this, Malina is surrounded by, shall we say, this unusual and eccentric group of characters who come to be known as the Suicide Squad.

How would you compare this project to others you’ve done in public television?

I think this is the most personal story I’ve ever told. And that’s because Malina’s letters – heartfelt, personal letters to his wife and to others – were there. Just before joining JPL, I produced a biography of John Glenn as my last project, just before he flew again on the space shuttle. And that project didn’t even come close to getting to the inner core. And I was staring eye-to-eye with Glenn. In contrast, Malina pours out his soul in his letters. What he did for the country, and what was done to him, should be known and never forgotten.

The film about the lunar missions in the 1960s is the most recent of these three. How would you compare it to the others?

In the third film, we find JPL being very ambitious, actually audacious, in its early desires to explore the solar system. And right away NASA and JPL are at loggerheads. NASA wants to go to the moon as a precursor to the Apollo program. Back in those days, the contract between JPL and NASA required both parties to agree on the work to be done. Imagine that! But the issue was settled for them. There wasn't yet a powerful enough rocket to blast off for the planets, so the moon became de facto the primary target. But to its horror, JPL found that even trying to just crash-land on the moon a very difficult thing to do. These were six consecutive Ranger failures in full glare of the public when the political dimension of the race for space against the Soviet Union put far more pressure on JPLers than what we experience today. William Pickering, the director of the lab during that period, called it the worst moment in JPL history. I think he was right.

So it's a story of flying too close to the sun with grand ambitions and having your wings singed quite a bit, only to ultimately rise to new heights. I struggled for some time with how to tell the story of all of these failures in a row without it becoming encyclopedic. It took a while to figure that out. The important piece of the puzzle was hearing firsthand accounts of those who had to live through such a difficult time. Since completing the film, we've lost three of the individuals who participated. So one of the things that we're very, very keen on doing as we march ahead in this series is capturing the stories firsthand, first-person, of as many of the JPLers as we can. All of them are pioneers of discovery in one way or another. And we want to make sure their stories are never forgotten.